

Task force gives cops muscle to hit gangs

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SUMMARY: Metro area | 6 police agencies team with the feds to boost their crime-fighting reach

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Officers get

training on

federal laws

MAXINE BERNSTEIN

Diangelo Dupre Harris asked the woman caller what size shoe she wore.

The woman paused, then said she usually wore "about a size 10."

"You're not hearing me," Harris told her, and repeated his question.

"Oh, OK," she replied. "I wear a size 25."

Harris asked whether she wanted "soft patent leather." The woman said she preferred the "hard" kind."

Harris wasn't interested in selling the woman a new pair of pumps. Police say he was finding out how much cocaine she wanted and her preference for powder or crack.

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The conversation, caught on federal wiretaps, was one of hundreds overheard by the Metro Gang Task Force in an 18-month investigation to cripple a drug-trafficking ring involving the Six Deuce Diamond Crips gang. Police say gang members operated in Portland, Tacoma and Seattle and ferried about 5 pounds of cocaine a month into the Portland area from their Mexican connection.

The investigation led to federal indictments starting last spring that now include 12 people who are scheduled for trial in U.S. District Court this fall. It marks one of the most complex cases the task force has delved into since it was formed in July 2006.

Officers representing six law enforcement agencies from Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas and Clark counties work side-by-side with federal agents in the task force. Though most local police agencies struggle with resources and are largely reacting to violence on the streets, the multiagency team aims to be proactive and deal with the fluidity of gangs.

"Gangs don't recognize borders between Vancouver and Oregon," U.S. Attorney Karin Immergut said.

Less organized gangs

Officials say there are approximately 118 documented gangs in Oregon, with close to 3,000 members. The Portland metropolitan area is estimated to have as many as 2,000 street gang members.

Last summer, the task force penetrated a Hoover Crips gang set that had a hankering for home-invasion robberies. In 2006, it pursued a white supremacist gang that sprang from prison to commit burglaries, steal guns and cheat banks from Washington County to Douglas and Jackson counties in southern Oregon, police and prosecutors said.

Anonymous tips and investigative leads from local officers and federal agents spurred much of the task force's early investigations.

Though federal prosecutors in major cities such as New York and Los Angeles have worked to cripple organized gangs such as the Latin Kings and Black Gangster Disciples, Oregon law enforcement officials say street gang activity in the Portland area isn't so easy to identify.

"One of the challenges is to figure out if people are actually organized," Immergut said. "There really aren't obvious big hierarchical and organized gangs plaguing our cities. So we started looking at what are our biggest threats. But that has been a little bit difficult to wrap our arms around."

Steve Briggs, chief counsel of the Oregon Department of Justice's criminal justice division, said the makeup of street gangs in Oregon --probably not by design --appears to be similar to that of terrorist cells.

"There's no structure necessarily, and the structure may change regularly," Briggs said.

Officers on the task force went through training on everything from how to seek federal court orders to tracing a suspect's incoming and outgoing calls to the intricacies of federal search-and-seizure laws. The FBI covers overtime costs and equipment, but each agency pays for officers' salaries.

Federal prosecutors aren't leaning toward racketeering cases because they've found that federal weapons and drug convictions can bring the same prison time without as many legal hoops.

Task force leaders say they're concerned about the rise in Latino gangs and are working on other cases they can't discuss yet. "The task force is dealing with more complex cases, so it's going to take longer to see the end result," said Beaverton Police Chief Dave Bishop, who sits on the task force board.

"A proactive and strategic approach that is multidisciplinary is the only way you're going to have a real impact," Immergut said.

Infiltration

Last summer, an informant told a Portland officer that he was being recruited to participate in several home-invasion robberies with a group of Hoover Crips. The Metro Gang Task Force got involved.

The officers placed a body wire on the informant, who met with those plotting the crimes.

From June 7 to June 15, authorities overheard Raymond Maurice Mosley, one of the ringleaders, say he had access to a "mac," (a 100 mm machine gun), a "9" (9mm pistol) and a "Colt," (Colt .45-caliber handgun). Mosley and his accomplices scoped out a Portland home near Northeast 68th Avenue and Glisan Street. The informant accompanied Mosley and his crew to several bars --the Nile in Vancouver and Hung Far Low in Southeast Portland --as they schemed.

Agents kept surveillance on the group. The informant told authorities that the plan was to target a Portland house where Mosley expected to find a pound of dope plus guns and \$10,000 in cash, and a Vancouver home with a 100-plus marijuana plant grow, according to court documents.

The gang talked about the layout of the targeted houses, how to get in, and where the guns and drugs would be found. They planned to knock on the doors with a bouquet of balloons, then push their way inside, order everyone to the ground at gunpoint and rip them off.

At 11:45 p.m. June 15, as two carloads of suspects headed to the Vancouver home, the metro gang team pounced, stopping them at gunpoint on Northeast Glisan by the Interstate 205 on-ramp. Several ran but were caught and arrested. Police seized four guns.

"Being able to prevent that crime was huge," Immergut said.

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Other successes

One of the earliest cases focused on a white supremacist prison gang, the Oregonized (sic) Aryan Crime Syndicate. Several members, who have tattoos of "38" because it represents the numerical sum of OACS, were convicted of burglaries in Washington County.

One of its more serious offenders, Dale Amstutz-Dunn, was tracked to Talent. Police say he pawned four stolen guns in Medford, including some snatched from a home burglary in Roseburg days before his Aug. 27, 2006 arrest. Amstutz-Dunn, 26, is now serving a 10-year federal prison sentence as an armed career criminal.

An anonymous, handwritten letter sent to the Portland FBI offices touched off the Six Deuce Diamond Crip drug-trafficking investigation. Twelve defendants face federal charges in the case, accused of running cocaine up and down Interstate 5. Mexican national Reveriano Morales Mendoza employed several people to deliver the drugs to his customers, according to prosecutors and court records.

Mendoza was Diangelo Dupre Harris' supplier. Harris, 32, of Portland, was distributing the cocaine and crack to other distributors in the city --all while collecting monthly Supplemental Security Income checks, court papers say. He cited a "borderline intellectual functioning" disability when applying for the SSI checks. Since 1996, he received SSI disability checks of between \$530 and \$630. Meanwhile, he accumulated a jewelry collection worth more than \$80,000, sported a "grille" of platinum and diamonds in his front teeth, and drove Cadillacs and Mercedeses around town, court records show.

Harris tried to talk in code on his cell phone when discussing drug orders, but police and federal agents quickly picked up his lingo. In a call to Mendoza's number, he complained that, "when you cook the pizza in the oven . . . the pepperoni's (expletive) up," and "the tacos were not getting hard." Authorities took that to mean he was having trouble converting the cocaine to crack.

Federal agents listened to several calls Harris had with various women. During one, he acknowledged that any gang associations probably could bring longer prison sentences if he were caught. During a Feb. 17 call, it was clear the woman talking to Harris was fed up with him. Harris got agitated. "Man, what is your problem with me? I mean I'm a hustler. Hustle comes first. That's how I eat."

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